

Freedom & Responsibility

October 30, 2011

If you go to an allopathic doctor, you get asked certain types of questions about your symptoms, questions that help the doctor figure out where you fall within the doctor's range of expertise. If you go to a homeopathic doctor, you get a different set of questions. If you go to a Chinese doctor, a different set. Ayurvedic, a different set. If you've grown up within any of these systems, the questions in that system will seem most natural to you. They're the sort of things you've learned to observe about yourself. You've learned to internalize the way that system looks at your body and at your disease. Other ways of looking at disease will seem strange.

Of course, the question always is, does that way of looking at your body serve your needs or just the needs of the system? You hear the history of allopathic medicine and how they squeezed out everybody else so they were the only ones who were not labeled as quacks. It helped expose a lot of actual charlatans, but it's also caused us to miss out on a lot of alternatives.

The same applies to psychiatry or psychotherapy. There are cases that would come to an exorcist in Thailand, and the exorcist would immediately say, oh, spirit possession. If the same sort of case came to a psychiatrist here in the States, he'd say, ah, schizophrenia. So which is it? You have to label it so you can cure it, but which label will lead to the most effective way of curing the disease? There's always the question: Are you being best served by these different systems or are you just being treated as more grist for their mill?

This is one of the areas in which the Buddha's teachings are really special. All he teaches, he says, are suffering and the end of suffering. But he doesn't really define suffering that clearly. He gives examples and they're pretty broad: not getting what you want, having to stay with what you don't like, being separated from what you do like. You can interpret these examples in your own language and tailor them to your needs. And the cure he advises is not one that he's going to impose on you. It's one that you have to administer yourself.

This gives you a little bit more confidence. You're not there for the sake of the institution. Of course, there have been Buddhist institutions that have developed around ways of defining your problem for you, like the Tibetan Book of the Dead or the Chinese Sutra of the Ten Kings, where they tell you you've got to look out for your dead ancestors because at this number of days after their death they're going to go to this court or they're going to go through this stage of the bardo and you've got to pay the monks or the nuns to do the proper chants to make sure your dead loved ones get through the stage. That sort of teaching is obviously there for the sake of the institution. But as for the original teachings, you realize that you're totally free to take them or not. Even the definition of your suffering is something you provide for yourself when you start out. As you practice, you'll find that your sense of what suffering is and how you're going to comprehend it will grow a lot more subtle, but it grows more subtle because you're getting more familiar with it.

So to preserve the Buddha's original intention, it's our responsibility as individuals to take charge of our own practice, our own cure. The Buddha gives pointers as to where to look. You look at where your cravings are, you look at where your ignorance is, you look at where your clingings are, all of which are very difficult things to see—and very difficult things to let go of, especially in the case of the clinging. You have a certain sense of your own identity: the things you like, the things you don't like, the things you're willing to put up with, the things you won't put up with, the things you will look at, and the things you refuse to look at. This can create obstacles to your seeing, and it takes a lot of honesty to overcome those obstacles. It helps to have someone who's been on the path before you to keep you honest.

This is why when the Buddha was teaching Rahula to look at his actions in terms of his intentions, the

immediate results, and the long term results, he said that if you notice that you did something that caused harm, go and talk it over with someone who's already on the path so you gain the benefit of that person's insight. When he talked to the Kalamas, telling them not to go simply by what your teacher says or by what the texts say, he also advised them not to go by their own sense of what seems right or wrong. This means that you've got to test things in practice to see which types of actions actually give good results and which ones give bad results. At the same time, he says, you have to take into consideration the opinions of the wise.

So you don't have to reinvent the Dhamma wheel every time you act. You're in a position where you can take advantage of other people's outside perspective, which is a real help because it's a lot easier for other people to see your defilements than it is for you to see your own. For those who have gone further on the path, it's even easier to see the types of defilements that everybody else in society takes for granted.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha often had his students go to practice in different parts of India away from where they had grown up. The culture would be different and that'd give a different perspective on the things you usually took for granted. I know this was one of the major advantages of my going to Thailand. Some of the values I took for granted and some of the activities and attitudes I took for granted, I suddenly discovered, were questioned over there and viewed with a certain amount of suspicion and skepticism. It was good to have that outside perspective.

But I still had to do the work on my own. This is what Ajaan Fuang meant when he said you have to think like a thief. Don't expect the teacher to hand everything to you. You have to try to figure things out for yourself. That doesn't mean just figuring out what the teachings are but also figuring out where your own defilements are, figuring out how you play tricks on yourself, how you hide things from yourself. You're the joint that has to be cased.

Only if you're willing to take on that responsibility is the training possible. The teacher is here to provide perspective, to help suggest opportunities or approaches you might not have thought of on your own—or that might have occurred to you only after a long time. But the basic work in administering the cure is *your* work. It requires a lot of honesty, a lot of patience: all the qualities that make you a reliable person.

So instead of simply presenting yourself to the doctor and asking for the cure, you start taking charge of your own cure. The role of the teacher is to keep watch so as to notice when you're getting off course. As Ajaan Chah said, he sees people wandering off the right side of the road so he says, "Go left, go left." Other people wander off the left side and he says, "Go right, go right." It's not a matter of simply copying down a few of a teacher's teachings and putting them in a book, taking them as his basic approach to the Dhamma or his basic teaching. The teachings have to be understood in context.

The crucial context is your own sense that you've had enough suffering—however you feel burdened—and that you want to put an end to it. This may take you a lot farther and require a lot more from you than you might have originally imagined. But as you get on the path, you realize that that's where you want to go. Nobody forces you to stay on the path. If you decide at a certain point that you want to wander off path, that's your choice. We're trying to preserve your freedom all the way through. But with freedom comes responsibility.

What keeps you going is a strong sense that if you don't follow the path, if you don't take care of your own mind, there's going to be suffering—which is not a point that some institution is trying to use to threaten you. It's a fact of life.

They talk in postmodern terms about how everything is determined by language, but pain is not totally determined by language. The way you interpret the pain, the way you understand how it's caused is largely determined by language, but the *fact* of the pain is always there, even prior to language. It's the reality that keeps impinging on whatever ideas we have about ourselves, whatever structures we build for our own self-identity or our idea of where we fit in the world or how the world fits around us. Those ideas may be expressed in language, but they keep running up against pain, which is something beyond language. The goal the Buddha proposes is also something beyond language. He states that one of the things you realize when

you come to the end of suffering is that you know how far language goes and you know what goes beyond language.

So it's not just a structure that we're trying to impose on you to keep you in the structure. This is a structure that's more like a fire escape designed to get you out of the structure, and it deals with problems that come prior to the structure. It's not that the disease is defined by the ability of the doctor to treat you. It's defined by your own sense of being burdened and weighed down by something hard to bear.

So keep these points in mind as you practice. The teacher is here to give pointers, to help give perspective, to call you on things you need to notice about your actions. But basically, *you're* the one who has to decide whether you're going to take the teacher's advice. And you're the one who has to decide if you're really serious about putting an end to suffering. There's freedom of choice, but with the freedom comes a lot of responsibility. If you don't take on that responsibility, you won't be able to find the even greater freedom of release.